

UNSOLVED MYSTERIES PODCAST | FATAL FIRE

S1E17 Transcript

MONTY GROVER: It was always people that knew each other, or friends, or something. Their house would burn all of a sudden. Every time, she's there within a couple miles from where the fire started. Everyone knew who did it, and nobody would do anything. Everybody was afraid their house would go next. It was just like she was Satan herself.

NARRATION: AT 3:30AM, THE PHONE RINGS AT THE HOME OF PENNY SMITH, AND STARTLES HER AWAKE. HER SISTER KATHY'S HOUSE IS ON FIRE AND NO ONE IS SURE IF KATHY MADE IT OUT ALIVE. AS PENNY RUSHES TO THE SCENE, SHE BELIEVES SHE KNOWS WHO'S BEHIND THE FIRE. AND IF SHE'S RIGHT, A DIABOLICAL ARSONIST, WHO'S BEEN LURKING IN PLAIN SIGHT, MIGHT HAVE JUST COMMITTED MURDER, AND THERE'S NO WAY TO KNOW WHO'S NEXT.

I'M STEVE FRENCH, AND THIS IS UNSOLVED MYSTERIES: "FATAL FIRE."

IT'S EARLY IN THE MORNING ON NOVEMBER 9TH, 2007, WHEN KATHY BLETLINGER'S SISTER, PENNY SMITH, GETS THE DEVASTATING NEWS.

PENNY SMITH: At about 3:38 in the morning, I guess it was, I got a phone call from my sister, Jodi. She says, "Kathy's house is on fire and they don't know if she made it out." And I said, "Sis," I said, "I'll be there just as quick as I can get there." And I told her on the phone, I said, "Don't worry yet, because Kathy's not supposed to be home. She's supposed to be staying all night with this friend." I called my brother Monty. I told him what was happening.

MONTY GROVER: I got a call at about quarter after four in morning from Penny. She said, "Kathy's house is on fire."

NARRATION: PENNY'S BROTHER MONTY IS THE OLDEST SIBLING IN THE GROVER FAMILY.

MONTY GROVER: When I got to the fire scene, my younger sister, Jodi, came running to me and was crying. And I stopped and I held her for about 5-10 minutes, and she just couldn't get her composure. She told me, she said, "She didn't get out." Said she couldn't get door open. Couldn't get the windows open. She was just surrounded by the flames.

PENNY SMITH: Kathy's death was caused by a house fire and smoke inhalation. They had found an accelerant, which was gasoline, and declared it arson and homicide.

MONTY GROVER: She was 34 when she died.

PENNY SMITH: We were just devastated. I mean, absolutely devastated. I had every possible negative emotion going through my mind at one time. It was just constant. Disbelief, sadness, anger, and not knowing how could someone do this? How could someone do this to her, to anyone, let alone just her. It was a devastating blow.

NARRATION: LOCATED BETWEEN CHICAGO AND ST. LOUIS, MT. STERLING, ILLINOIS IS TYPICAL SMALL-TOWN AMERICA. THIS IS WHERE KATHY GROVER BLENTLINGER LIVED MOST OF HER TRAGICALLY SHORTENED LIFE.

MONTY GROVER: It's a very small town. Everyone's related, I think. My family tree only forked once. It's so small, but it'll take you 15 minutes to get down two blocks, just because of people stopping and talking. Mom and Dad, they had eight children, and I just was lucky enough to be the first. And then, I got a brother named Tom. He was next. And then a brother named Greg. Then I've got a sister named Penny, and a sister named Jodi, sister named Kathy.

PENNY SMITH: Kathy and I were so close. I never realized how dependent we were on one another until she was gone. Kathy and I did everything together. She loved to have fun. She loved her family. Kathy was just a very unique individual. She was actually my very best friend.

MONTY GROVER: Kathy was just a typical little country farm girl who was very prissy. A little blonde girl with blue eyes and had to have everything just right for her, because she was kind of the nervous sort. But, Kathy was very social, very easy to get along with.

PENNY SMITH: What people need to understand about Kathy is she was a very trusting and naive, young girl. She trusted everyone.

NARRATION: AT THE TIME OF HER DEATH, KATHY IS A SINGLE MOM RAISING AN EIGHT-YEAR-OLD AND STUDYING TO BECOME A MEDICAL ASSISTANT.

MONTY GROVER: She was married and getting a divorce at that time. Had a little boy, and the night that the fire happened, the little boy did not happen to be home. He was saying with his dad that night.

PENNY SMITH: Kathy was a loving person. She babysat and took care of the majority of children in Mt. Sterling during her life. Everyone loved her. She would do anything for anyone.

NARRATION: TWO OF THE CHILDREN KATHY OFTEN TAKES CARE OF ARE THE YOUNG SON AND DAUGHTER OF HER SISTER-IN-LAW, SUZY, WHO IS 7 YEARS YOUNGER THAN KATHY. SUZY IS MARRIED TO KATHY'S YOUNGER BROTHER AND THEY SHARE A LOVE OF SUZY'S CHILDREN.

PENNY SMITH: Kathy and Suzy's relationship, for a period of time, was pretty good. Kathy would always take care of their daughter, you know, and be there for their daughter and stuff while they were working and so forth. And Suzy just became a different person. She became very, very jealous of Kathy.

NARRATION: SUZY'S JEALOUSY SEEMS TO BEGIN WHEN KATHY'S SON IS BORN. AFTER COMPLICATIONS WITH HER PREGNANCY, KATHY NEARLY DIES, AND AS A RESULT SHE RECEIVES A LOT OF ATTENTION FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS. SUZY BECOMES RESENTFUL, AND AS KATHY RECOVERS, TENSIONS GROW. IT'S DURING THIS TIME THAT A STRANGE EPIDEMIC STARTS TO PLAGUE MT. STERLING — A SERIES OF UNEXPLAINED FIRES.

MONTY GROVER: All of a sudden, fires started springing up. Not just in Mt. Sterling, but also within about a 20-mile radius. I think there was about, like, 23 fires they had. It was always people that knew each other, or friends, or something. Their house would burn all of a sudden. Nobody'd know how it was done, or what.

PENNY SMITH: The fires that were happening around the area, it was really just devastating. I mean, you didn't go but just a few days, maybe and hear of another one, and another one, and another one. And you knew a lot of the people who was affected by these fires. It just kept going on, and on, and on. Everything was catching fire.

NARRATION: MOST OF THE FIRES APPEAR TO BE CONNECTED TO PEOPLE IN SUZY'S LIFE. MONTY FIRST BECOMES SUSPICIOUS WHEN TRAGEDY STRIKES AT THE HOME SUZY SHARES WITH HIS YOUNGER BROTHER.

MONTY GROVER: The apartment they were living in caught on fire. And I heard the fire department and went on up, because I am a paramedic and I wanted to check and just make sure everything was okay. And when I got down there, Suzy was wild and hysterical and says, "I think I'm cursed." I said, "What's going on" and she says, "We were asleep and the place caught on fire." And then I found out that she had a history. Her mom and dad's house was seriously caught on fire and burned down.

PENNY SMITH: Suzy's sister's home caught on fire. Her neighbor's garage caught on fire. Her car caught on fire. A babysitter's truck caught on fire. Many, many, many friends' homes caught fire.

MONTY GROVER: This girl's name kept popping up, that she had been there, or she was just there, within a couple miles. Found out that every once in a while, she'd run into somebody, and they'd just get into a little tiff, and all of a sudden, these houses started catching on fire of the people she was having problems with. It finally got to the place where the whole town of Mt. Sterling would step off the curb to let her pass, extremely scared of what was gonna happen next.

NARRATION: THE RASH OF FIRES COINCIDES WITH THE INCREASING CONFLICT BETWEEN KATHY AND SUZY. KATHY TRIES TO MANAGE THE ROCKY RELATIONSHIP AS BEST SHE CAN, WHILE ALSO DEALING WITH ONGOING MEDICAL ISSUES. SHE RELIES ON PAINKILLERS TO GET HER THROUGH THE DAY, AND ON MORE THAN ONE OCCASION, SHE NOTICES THAT SOME OF HER MEDICINE IS MYSTERIOUSLY MISSING.

PENNY SMITH: Kathy would constantly say, "My medications are gone! I have no medicine." I started kind of putting a connection together that I believed Suzy was involved in taking these medications, because that was the only common denominator.

NARRATION: TO CONFIRM HER SUSPICION THAT SUZY IS BEHIND THE DISAPPEARANCE OF HER PAINKILLERS, KATHY ENLISTS THE HELP OF THE POLICE, AND TOGETHER THEY DEVISE A PLAN TO CATCH SUZY IN THE ACT WHEN KATHY ISN'T HOME.

PENNY SMITH: Suzy had talked to Kathy about borrowing her vacuum cleaner. So, they set it up for a time for Suzy to be at the house.

MONTY GROVER: They put in cameras in Kathy's house, in the bedroom, pointed at where the medicine was, and went with the Police and they sat across the street in a van and they were watching all the video. And sure as anything, here comes Suzy.

PENNY SMITH: And Suzy had gone right past the vacuum cleaner, right to the place where Kathy's medications were.

MONTY GROVER: Suzy unloaded the medicine into her pockets. And, uh, the final thing she did was she put the lid back on the bottle, she went got a rag and wiped her fingerprints off. And the police were sitting there with Kathy, watching all this.

NARRATION: SUZY IS ARRESTED FOR STEALING KATHY'S MEDICATION, BUT IS SENTENCED TO ONLY TWO DAYS IN JAIL AND PROBATION. SHE'S FURIOUS WITH KATHY FOR SETTING UP THE STING OPERATION AND MAKES IT CLEAR THAT SHE'S OUT FOR REVENGE.

PENNY SMITH: Suzy told me that she would not stop until Kathy lost everything that she had, including her husband, and got everything she deserved. And from that time forward, it was even worse. And I mean, Kathy couldn't go anywhere. She couldn't do anything without Suzy harassing her, or trying to hurt her. And I would always put myself between Suzy and Kathy, make sure Kathy was safe and Suzy wasn't going to do anything. So, this one particular instance, somehow, I don't know how she got to her, but she came over knowing Kathy had hip replacements, hooked her leg in between Kathy's legs, and hyper extended her hip, and put her on the ground. And when I saw what was happening, I saw Kathy down. We got her up. We walked right down to the police station and tried to press charges.

NARRATION: SUZY'S CRUELTY TOWARD HER SISTER-IN-LAW CONTINUES, UNCHECKED. IN ONE INSTANCE, KATHY FINDS HERSELF ALONE WITH SUZY, WHO BECOMES VIOLENT.

PENNY SMITH: Suzy literally beat my sister, Kathy. Suzy got her to the ground, laid Kathy on her back, she straddled her, put her knees down around her arms so she couldn't move, and beat her face. She had a lot of injuries.

NARRATION: SUZY FACES NO REPERCUSSIONS FOR THE ASSAULT.

PENNY SMITH: We went to the city police. We went to the county police. We went to the state's attorney, and we went to the judge. The city police said, "We're doing what we can." The county police says, "We really don't know what we can do." The state's attorney shrugged his shoulders at me. And the judge of the town said, "One of you need to move out of state."

MONTY GROVER: It just kept growing from there. It just got closer, and closer, and closer. And Kathy was afraid. She was scared. She asked me, she said, "Monty, don't let her burn me up." I told her, I

said, "Kathy I won't, you just tell me when you are a little bit afraid, you give me a call. I'll be there. I'll sleep on your couch." I said, "She'll never make it through the door."

PENNY SMITH: My sister Kathy was terrified of Suzy, and that's why I would always try to go out with her or go anywhere with her to make sure that she didn't do anything. Because I did not fear Suzy like other people did. Kathy had made this statement many times. "She's going to burn my house down and she's going to kill me."

NARRATION: ON THE NIGHT OF NOVEMBER 8TH, 2007, KATHY HAS JUST FINISHED A CLASS AT VATTEROTT COLLEGE, IN QUINCY, ILLINOIS, WHEN A FRIEND INVITES HER TO STOP BY THE LOCAL BAR AND GRILL FOR A LATE DINNER. SINCE HER SON IS SPENDING THE NIGHT WITH HIS FATHER, KATHY AGREES. WHEN THEY ARRIVE, SUZY IS THERE, TOO.

PENNY SMITH: There were many people in there and people were buying drinks, buying rounds for people, and Kathy was included in that. But they were not buying drinks for Suzy, which upset Suzy.

MONTY GROVER: Kathy, I know she was up there dancing and having a great time. Her and Suzy got into it and Kathy just went home, went to bed. Never thought anything more of it.

NARRATION: AFTER KATHY FALLS ASLEEP, SOMEONE SNEAKS BEHIND HER HOUSE, SPLASHES GASOLINE INTO THE BACK ENTRANCE, AND TOSSES A MATCH INTO THE LIQUID FUEL. KATHY MUST HAVE WOKEN UP TO SMOKE AND FLAMES FILLING THE HOUSE AND TRIED TO ESCAPE.

MONTY GROVER: Kathy barely made it to the window, couldn't get it open, and she collapsed right there on the floor, right at the foot of her bed. They said her lungs were full of smoke, and a lot of poisonous gases in there from being such an old house. The best thing about it is, they said, "She probably didn't suffer any." She just got a good lungful, and that was it.

NARRATION: SEARCHING THROUGH THE BURNT REMAINS OF KATHY'S HOME, INVESTIGATORS FIND CHILLING EVIDENCE THAT THE FIRE WAS CAREFULLY PLANNED TO ENSURE MAXIMUM DAMAGE.

MONTY GROVER: They got to investigating the house and, I'll be darned, someone had removed the smoke alarm before the fire was set. There's a hole in the wall and in the plaster. And in the wood, you could tell where it had been pried out of the wall. So, she had no warning. No way of knowing. That was surely a planned situation. And then, that night, poured gasoline, set it afire, didn't have a chance. Old house, went up like matchsticks. It was just gut-wrenching. I didn't have to go in. I didn't have to get close. I already knew what was going on. I knew who'd done it. I knew what happened. It was just so obvious.

PENNY SMITH: There was a time that I actually looked Suzy in the eye and I told her to her face, "I know you started this fire and I know you killed her." The only reaction that I got was a shrug of the shoulders.

RAJAH MAPLES: If everybody knows who did it, why isn't this person behind bars?

NARRATION: RAJAH MAPLES IS A TELEVISION JOURNALIST WHO HAS COVERED KATHY'S STORY FOR 13 YEARS.

RAJAH MAPLES: In covering the Kathy Blentlinger case, my crew and I ended up talking with probably a little more than 20 people, both on and off the record. Our takeaway was one sentence. They said, "We think we know who did it." She told people, before she died, that she was scared of dying in a fire. She told someone, "If somebody kills me, go look for this person." That happened just weeks before. I don't know why she said that, but she did. She was very fearful.

NARRATION: AS THE POLICE INVESTIGATION DRAGS ON, RAJAH DECIDES TO INTERVIEW THE STATE'S ATTORNEY ABOUT THE CASE.

RAJAH MAPLES: Arson cases are among the most difficult to prove because of the destruction of evidence. And so, you know, I said, "Do you think this case will ever go before a grand jury?" And he said, "Yes. If we get to the point where I have enough evidence, definitely. We're trying to solidify a case a little more to present to the grand jury." Here's the kicker, when I asked, "Has a person or persons of interest been identified?" He answered, "We have had leads and they have been followed up on. At this point, I would hesitate to say suspects or persons of interest." So, I don't know if I have to read between the lines with that one. What I mean by that; was he scared of her? I even considered, believe it or not, not doing the story because I was told "to watch my back." And when I asked what they meant by that, they said, "The person who did this sets fires to people who make her mad. And I wouldn't put it past her to come after you."

RAJAH MAPLES: Well, I didn't forget that. I thought of it at night, as I was falling asleep. I would thought of it, you know, when I was working on it. It caused me to think twice about even doing that story, because she could have come after me. From what people tell me, there were some mental health issues. I know what can happen when there are people with mental health issues and when they get someone in their target. I would be scared to death.

NARRATION: THE STATE'S ATTORNEY GETS ANOTHER VISIT. THIS TIME, FROM KATHY'S BROTHER MONTY, WHO PLEADS FOR JUSTICE AND CLOSURE.

MONTY GROVER: If they didn't have an eyewitness, they said they couldn't guarantee a prosecution, and then she would get off. You know, if she was acquitted then he couldn't try her again. But he looked me in the eye when he was done, he said, "You know, this is a small town. It's a small county. We don't have a lot of money." He said, "It'll cost a million dollars to try this case." And he says, "I'm sorry, but they don't have a million dollars." So, it all comes back to money and politics.

RAJAH MAPLES: It is extremely expensive to prosecute a murder case. On top of that, if the defendant is found not guilty, that person could end up suing the city and the county for wrongdoing.

PENNY SMITH: I got so tired of hearing "circumstantial evidence" every time you turn around. "Oh, that's circumstantial. That's circumstantial." You have a town of 2,800 people. Everyone knows

everything about everything, until it really matters. It became fear. It became a lot of fear with the people. No one wanted to upset her and fear something would burn. Because every time she would get angry, something burned. I do not feel like my life was in danger because I wasn't as trusting of a person as what Kathy was. I do know that I can take care of myself, but Suzy did not ever threaten me, because I would not have tolerated it.

NARRATION: AS MONTHS PASS, KATHY'S FAMILY AND LOCALS IN THE TOWN OF MT. STERLING NOTICE SOMETHING HAS CHANGED.

MONTY GROVER: After Kathy's death, all the fires seemed to mysteriously stop. And if you did see a fire start, somebody'd be back there, you could stop and you'd say, "Do you need any help?" They'd say, "No, we'll have it out in a minute," while they're fanning it with their hat. Nothing big happened again. That was the first person that had died in a fire, in that area, and that was the last person that died in a fire in that area.

NARRATION: AFTER KATHY'S DEATH, SUZY'S LIFE TAKES A DARK TURN. TO THOSE AROUND HER, SHE APPEARS ANXIOUS AND TROUBLED, AS IF HARBORING A GUILTY SECRET.

PENNY SMITH: Suzy began drinking so, so intensely. It was nothing for her to have a bottle of vodka a day, maybe more. And it finally came to the point that she was told, you know, "If you have another drink, it can kill you." And I guess she didn't heed it.

MONTY GROVER: She had cirrhosis of the liver, drank her liver hard. There's guilt in there somewhere.

NARRATION: SUZY PASSES AWAY IN AUGUST OF 2017 AT THE AGE OF 36. MONTY AND PENNY ARE LEFT WITH MANY UNANSWERED QUESTIONS, AND THE ONGOING PAIN OF LOSING THEIR SISTER, KATHY.

PENNY SMITH: I was hoping to be able to get a final conversation with Suzy about the night of the fire during the last part of Suzy's life, so that I could maybe get her to come clean, so that she could pass with a clear conscience and know that she could be forgiven. But I never did get that chance.

RAJAH MAPLES: I see the Kathy Blentlinger case as being three unsolved mysteries into one case. A) The unsolved mystery of who set this fire. We don't officially know. B) The unsolved mystery of, if we do think we know who set the fire, why was that person never prosecuted? and C) Are there more people involved, who are still living and know important information, that would crack this case?

PENNY SMITH: I do not believe Suzy acted alone. I believe there are more people involved in this. Because somebody doesn't have to strike a match, someone can be a lookout. So, there are two other people that I'm looking at, and if anybody's got information, I would love to hear it.

MONTY GROVER: I'm pretty darn sure that Suzy did not act alone. She had some help. She had this little girl gang of hers. That, where one was, you would see the rest of them. Or, whenever a fire would start up, every one of them would disappear. Except for Suzy who would come back and watch it bake.

PENNY SMITH: I tried everything in my power I could to try to protect my sister. And at this time, I just feel so devastated because I wasn't able to protect her and keep her safe. And I'm very upset that we cannot get the rest of the answers that we are searching for to try to find some closure in this case and to try to heal our hearts and our minds. So many people loved Kathy and Kathy was a beautiful girl. She was very smart, very funny, very caring, and very loving. I miss her laugh. I miss her smell. I miss her hugs. I miss our conversations. I miss the middle of the night phone calls, when she's going through something, saying, "My eyes are leaking again," and I'd say "It's okay, sis. We'll dry them up." It's the little things, just being together all the time. I miss everything about her.

MONTY GROVER: I miss the family get togethers, because I'd tease her. I'd goad her right, right to the point, I could push her buttons. And she could turn around do the same thing, and I always enjoyed that.

PENNY SMITH: It has been 13 years since my sister's fire and homicide. I'm very hopeful that it will eventually get solved. I might have to make a lot of noise. It's really important that we get closure because you don't want to wonder for the rest of your life. I vowed, until I take my last breath, I will never stop fighting to try to get it solved.

NARRATION: IF YOU HAVE ANY INFORMATION ABOUT THE MURDER OF KATHY BLENTLINGER IN MT. STERLING, ILLINOIS, GO TO UNSOLVED.COM.

NEXT, ON UNSOLVED MYSTERIES...

25:34

DR. GALLAGHER: She experienced these attacks just as if someone was physically beating her constantly, while onlookers would be either mystified or horrified that they would see bruises appear on her with no obvious material cause.

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Unsolved Mysteries is a production of Cosgrove Meurer Productions and Cadence 13. It is executive produced by Terry Dunn Meurer and Chris Corcoran. Produced by Lloyd Lochridge, Christine Lenig, Courtney Ennis, and Paige Hymson, and Paul Yates. The Story Producer for this episode was Cynthia Bowles, And it was edited by Paul Yates.

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THANKS FOR LISTENING TO EPISODE 17 OF UNSOLVED MYSTERIES.